Getting wind of enigmatic CLIL in Italy – on the way towards *Ithaca*

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Abstract

"These are the days of the curriculum vitae,
rather than the dolce vita"
(Coughlan, 2012).

Under the echo of this philosophy, Italy is making a revolutionary shift towards the institutionalisation of CLIL, which is both a ground-breaking and popular practice in the country. This article aims to probe into CLIL's identity and its current state in Italy by pinpointing strengths and flaws in a long journey towards exploration. The study at its inception considers CLIL as rather "enigmatic" given its manifold profiles and characteristics in different countries. Attaining therefore a lucid understanding of CLIL emerges as a pivotal goal for an effective *in situ* implementation.

This action research aims to cultivate both *conceptual* (general) and *empathetic* (attitudes, feelings) *understanding* (Allwright, 2015) that constitute the basis for exploration and action. In this framework, the study comes up with a new perceptual model, i.e. CESL (Content and Language Shared Learning) which brings about a fresh understanding of CLIL's form and function. The research scrutinises the impact of this new approach, as well as the typology of competencies and attitudes developed throughout a full -CLIL procedure. The overall goal is to stimulate the implementation of innovations from a bottom-up vision, which is intrinsic to action research philosophy and contributes to reflective and critical insights.

Background

Origin and theory

CLIL is an educational approach currently in vogue that meshes content and language learning in a balanced way by focusing on the development of linguistic and cognitive competences. Regardless of CLIL's current popularity, its origin dates back to the Roman Empire where teaching content via another language (i.e. Greek) was ubiquitous (Coyle, Marsh and Hood, 2010). Much later in the 1960s in Canada there was an urgent need to teach the English speaking population the other official language (i.e. French), which resulted in the development of Bilingual Education and Content Based Instruction (CBI) (Cummins, 2009). For the European context as well the CLIL approach is "a rose by any other name" as the teaching of school subjects through English has extensively been used in British boarding schools in the last twenty years (Butler, 2012: 16).

CLIL is an offshoot of CBI and addresses predominantly EFL contexts. It may be considered a sort of Lingua Franca, because learners in

many contexts, despite sharing the same L2, must communicate in a CLIL context through a specific terminology (for example, on Erasmus exchange programmes). CLIL has relied so far on SLA theories such as the Communicative Approach, TBLT, the 4 Cs framework (Communication, Culture, Content, Cognition) (Coyle, Marsh and Hood, 2010). Especially the 4 Cs framework can operate as a platform for building effective lesson planning. *Culture* is a somehow neglected aspect of CLIL that exacts deeper exploration. *Content* and *Cognition* are in a constant interplay as Content is the input that provokes a cognitive and metacognitive processing of both language and content. *Communication* operates in a continuum of Input-Process-Output (I-P-O) by activating diverse skills, such as: identify, perceive, analyse.

The implementation of CLIL has met with success in different countries such as Germany, Austria, Finland etc conforming to the European motto on the promotion of multilingualism (MIUR, 2012). Some academics though view CLIL with scepticism and hold the opinion that selectivity, rather than uniformity in its implementation can guarantee successful learning results (Paran, 2013), because CLIL like all other innovations cannot be considered an educational panacea.

CLIL in Italy

Italy is a country with a marked propensity towards implementing innovative practices and inter alia CLIL, which enjoys a high-status compared with traditional language learning (Coughlan, 2012). All stakeholders (including teachers, learners, parents) have responded very positively towards this innovative learning approach in an extensive implementation that goes back a decade. The experimentation with CLIL has been mostly based on initiatives stemming from personal interest and enthusiasm (Magnani, 2009), but exaggeration, or overenthusiasm with CLIL can sometimes blur its benefits. The prevalent form of CLIL practised in Italy has been that of a codocenza (team-teaching) model with the content teacher providing the input in L1 and the language teacher correcting, or modifying any linguistic errors. Such a model bore many problematic aspects, so independent learning (monodocenza) is proposed.

Recently Italy has made a leap towards a curricular integration of CLIL by designating it a compulsory subject in the last three years of Licei Linguistici and in the final year of Licei Scientifici (2013–2014) through a new school reform (MIUR, 2012). Evolving preoccupations have set recently first-hand priorities as to an effective CLIL curricular integration starting from an earlier period (Giannini, 2014). Moreover, some Italian universities like the "Polytechnic of Milan" are shifting totally towards English CLIL conforming to a general need for a multicultural academic environment. Such a decision has met with some dissenting voices that perceive it as a kind of linguistic dictatorship (Coughlan, 2012).

It is a fact though that educators in view of reforms, or innovations are often found between two fires: learners' needs and imposed changes, fighting to strike a balance against real needs and "perfect planning". Educators should have a solid grasp of the target language and CLIL methodology so as to be models of leadership for their learners and not be confused, or resistant practitioners.

Research focus

Research question and context

> *Why has the implementation of CLIL gone astray, despite the enthusiasm and commitment to implement it?*

The immersion in the context started with this question hoping it would not remain just rhetorical. The pilot project involves a senior upper school (Liceo Scientifico) in Rome with a participation of a considerable number of learners (no=267) with an age span of 13–16 years old. Their L2 level ranges from CEFR A2 (Waystage) – B1 (Threshold) and they demonstrate both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivation towards English. The project is compatible with the Italian law that considers schools as independent in putting into practice innovative projects that can update, or ameliorate the quality of school practices (MIUR, 2012). This project runs parallel to curricular English lessons, but the dominant language in foreign language classes in Italian public schools paradoxically tends to be L1.

Methodology

The kernels of this action research are understanding and exploration rendering this study a sample of *exploratory action research* (Smith, 2015). Conceptual understanding here consists of examining CLIL and its epistemic role through participant observation. Empathetic understanding on the other hand involves stakeholders' outlooks on CLIL and its effect (cfr section 1). These two genres of understanding are pivotal in amalgamating two overriding perceptions of CLIL in Italy (team-teaching and independent learning) through a transitory phase, the CLSL (Content and Language Shared Learning) model. It is a gradual phase where the content teacher provides input in L1 and the CLIL practitioner (the author of this article) summarises the focal points in L2 by posing in turn comprehension questions. This is called *maieutic CLIL* (or pre CLIL) as it resorts to the Socratic method of learning through questioning strategies (Agolli, 2015). The content teacher and the CLIL practitioner decided in advance the topics explored, but all CLSL, or pre-CLIL lessons had a natural flow once the code-switching model was never prescribed. Everything came out naturally, but this presupposes a sound knowledge of the content area and L1. For this purpose I had to study in depth the content topics, which rendered me a learner *ex novo*. Learners are exposed to *maieutic* CLIL for about 3–4 months and then immersed into full CLIL with an exclusive use of L2 for two consecutive academic years. Pre CLIL and full CLIL are taught one academic hour per week (ranging from 60 to 90 minutes). Throughout each session in the full CLIL procedure learners are exposed to new scientific phenomena by practising immanent linguistic, or grammatical structures. Each lesson was planned in a way that could exploit the content area by setting both language and content-driven objectives. In turn learners are given the opportunity to extend "classroom content learning" and explore diverse natural phenomena by an individual research (e.g. earthquakes; volcanoes; tectonic plates etc.) through different tasks that according to the TBLT principles can turn into longer tasks, or projects (Agolli, 2016). Learners came back in the classroom with an enhanced knowledge that is experiential and transferable. The contextual reality along with the

need for exploration and understanding gave rise to the subsequent research questions:

1. How does team teaching influence CLIL?
2. What sort of competencies do CLIL learners cultivate?
3. Which is the impact of CLIL on learners' affective domain?

Data collection and analysis

The observation involves ten structured lessons and other unstructured ones during the first academic year. The research uses the triangulation method by resorting to both qualitative and quantitative tools that could better cultivate conceptual and empathetic understanding (c.f.r. section 3.1). The qualitative dimension is evident in the use of observation schedules and checklists for monitoring productive skills (speaking and writing). The checklist uses the CEFR outline for analysing speaking and writing skills with an emphasis on fluency, lexical, grammatical, cognitive and metacognitive competencies. The monitoring of competencies amenable to the productive skills was extended to the content area as well. Finally, an interview with three content teachers offers a further qualitative analysis to the whole procedure.

The quantitative analysis is made through an indirect data gathering tool (a learner's questionnaire) consisting of three categories: a) *dichotomous* questions (yes-no questions) used for screening purposes b) *multiple-choice* questions that address students' beliefs c) Likert-*scale* questions that measure attitudes. The latter are limited to a three- point scale, as they address school learners, whose judgement I consider should not be manipulated by adding categories that can confuse them. The questionnaires gauge the development of learners' competencies with close reference to their productive skills and their affective domain.

The data undergo both a quantitative and qualitative analysis. The questionnaires are analysed by using the Excel statistical software and are interpreted as well from a qualitative point of view. The interview with the three content teachers is firstly recorded and then transcribed by using content and relational analysis by using a classification tree that encompasses overarching ideas, or themes. The checklist analysis was made by using graphs and descriptive texts for both content and language areas. Moreover, the transcription of some recorded lessons with an overview (general ideas) and selective verbatim (specific ideas) methodology helped in analyzing some spoken corpora, frequent errors and communication strategies that are considered crucial for the development of linguistic and content–oriented competencies.

Findings

The impact of team teaching on CLIL's functionality

The concomitance of two teachers, languages and approaches is rewarding and the collaborative spirit of Italian content teachers impressed me, despite team-teaching being affected by regular tensions (Kong, 2014). The CLSL model takes on three directions as three content teachers explain. Teacher A views the CLSL model as a pre- CLIL phase that will introduce CLIL gradually. Teacher B interprets it as a concurrent

learning procedure and points out the necessity for an integration of team-teaching in the school curriculum. Teacher C perceives the new model as a curricular evaluative phase with content and language being assessed simultaneously by the content and language teacher.

On the other hand, learners support fervently the CLSL model and consider it as important on its whole (75%). The model contributes to a parallel exposure to L1 and L2 input (34%) through the elaboration of new notions (31%). It smooths the progress of learning (22%), but is not seen as a way to assuage the fears that an innovation may bring in (14%) as conversely Teacher A points out. Learners embrace this model as a mode of harnessing critical and transversal thinking. Team-teaching can thus be a precursor to the launch of a full CLIL through independent learning.

Versatility of CLIL competencies

The observation demonstrates that the comprehension of both content and language areas follows an increasing pace, as juxtaposed to the relatively low L2 level and cognitive or lexis load. Learners especially at the beginning of the CLIL experience intermittently draw on L1 linguistic structures to convey meaning in L2 in both genres. Such is the case of a learner who refers to the "dwarf planet" as "planet nano". Such practices are common in the written discourse as well. For example they write the English word "system" as "sistem" influenced by the Italian word "sistema", or write "Pluto" as "Pluton" driven by the Italian equivalent " Plutone". In the face of these linguistic errors, this depicts a similar picture with that of bilingual programs (Cummins, 2009) – fluency and communicative competencies are well-developed. Learners seem to develop their fluency by 60% and believe to have developed their lexical competencies by 49%. Moreover their communicative competences record an increase of 30%.

On the same wavelength solely after an etymological analysis of scientific terms such as: Pangea (Pan+ gaea = All earth) learners are convinced about the origin of the term which they considered Italian given the acoustic affinity. The disentangling of the esoteric language found in science subjects via an etymological analysis shines a light on the development of metacognitive competencies. 80.6 % of learners consider that their understanding of the content area is improved through CLIL and this is confirmed by a good performance in oral presentations, or written tasks and tests.

Despite linguistic complications, CLIL leads on to an improvement of cross-linguistic awareness (L1& L2) by gradually building knowledge into the learners' *ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development)* (CEFR, 2001) by alleviating language difficulties. In a nutshell, there is observed an increase of learning consciousness through the cultivation of mutual skills stemming from the intersection of content and language areas.

Stances and views on CLIL

Learners found CLIL in the beginning rather daunting considering the quasi-incompatible L2 level and the content cognitive load. Then they manifested a great interest towards CLIL innovation, because it stimulates their curiosity and boosts their self- confidence. They embrace

CLIL by 88.4% and would like to continue this experience (91%). This action research exploits learners' empathetic understanding into a course of critical evaluation by identifying empirically improvements and deficiencies. The capacity to pin down these aspects adds up to the sense of self-efficacy, self- confidence and motivation.

This feature dovetails with an overall positive learning attitude towards CLIL in the last open-ended question:

> *keep it this way, my English is better thanks to CLIL, I would only like to continue this project*
> Learner comment

> *with room for some improvement: more lab experiments in CLIL, too fast speaking*
> Learner comment

It is detected that learners obtain a critical and emotive style of learning, which is not ensnared in gender discrepancies. All content teachers (A, B, C) endorse a surge of learners' enthusiasm even in the corresponding L1 content area with learners asking for additional CLIL lessons.

Critical insights

Robust methodological and pedagogical approach

Throughout this exploratory practice each lesson was a mirror for the subsequent ones, because the conceptual and empathetic understanding got deeper this way (c.f.r. section 1). This study demonstrates that context is a pivotal component in understanding and implementing innovations. So, code switching is important in rendering CLIL gradual, whilst the "codocenza model" can be a sample of learning leadership. Moreover, a robust methodological approach should be embraced in order to better understand uncharted, or enigmatic areas of CLIL by permuting theories springing from SLA and CMA (Content Area Methodology) (CLIL methodology = SLA + CAM). In other words, etymological approach, analogical thinking and experiential research should become an immanent feature of CLIL methodology. This study further highlights the importance of knowing learners' L1 in order to tackle effectively error analysis in a CLIL context. Finally, the compilation of a framework of CLIL competencies, as those observed in the CEFR (2001) is crucial for a more profound analysis of linguistic, cognitive and affective domain in the CLIL context.

Compatibility between planning and implementing innovations

This study reveals that a kind of dichotomy between idealistic planning and difficulty in implementation has been the Achilles' heel of CLIL implementation in Italy, despite an exhaustive practice prior to the reform initiative. Developing a holistic understanding of innovations is important prior to their implementation. Understanding, knowledge and reflection can become the triptych for a successful execution. What is more, starting from below renders learning tangible and modifiable. Learners may seem like a tabula rasa in view of innovations, but welcome them even more fervently than some educators, or decision

makers who remain sometimes stuck to top-down approaches. Educators and decision makers should always feel the impulse of learners, because innovations can be prosperous only with the holistic involvement of all stakeholders' expertise (Waters, 2009).

Looking into the future

However intriguing CLIL looks, it is not a panacea, but an alternative learning approach that exacts a good knowledge of both language and content areas. The curricular integration of CLIL in Italy and other countries remains a national policy (Civinini, 2015), but should not neglect the role of EFL within the school curriculum, which should be assiduously invigorated, once content and language are co-dependent. CLIL may function as a learning passport that links up secondary with higher education and the world market boosting its status as a Lingua Franca and rendering it an indispensable chunk of the curriculum.

The identified problematic areas in this study denote that an abstract, top-down implementation cannot a priori guarantee success in the learning domain. CLIL, as an innovation, should aim at the Aristotelian model of entelechy where perfection is attained through practical approaches that firstly cultivate concrete, functional and inherent educational practices. A mere transfer of other CLIL models distant from local realities cannot necessarily be functional, or laurel-crowned. Reaching the CLIL's Ithaca was not a dolce vita, but surely wonderful, as this journey was long, full of adventures, and full of knowledge indeed.

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